

DIARY: NEW IDEAS, NEW FRIENDS
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March 20

Uneventful flight, thank goodness. Palm trees are the first indication that I'm in Florida. After about 40 minutes, the limousine turns into a winding driveway and stops at a guard's booth. I notice the words *Soka Gakkai International — Florida Nature and Culture Center* carved into the stone wall. Tears sting my eyes as I begin to understand the magnitude of this place. Swimming pool to my right, complete with beach chairs and laughing sun worshippers. Several peach-colored stucco buildings off in the distance.

Efficient check-in and effusive greetings from the other members. I'm directed to my building. Poke my head into the jacuzzi room and the TV lounge. This is truly a resort! My room is a spacious hotel-like double with packaged soaps and tiny bottles of shampoo.

It dawns on me that I need to savor every moment, that this is going to be a special experience. Everyone I meet along the path is smiling and friendly; some riding bikes, others just arriving with their suitcases. I walk beside the 20-acre human-made lake, awed by the dancing water fountain. We're free to use the brand new bikes propped up everywhere. Grab a purple one and put my belongings in the basket.

Walk through the dining hall piling fruit, pasta, rice, everything on my tray, wanting to taste it all. It hits me that I am in this beautiful, luxurious, spa-like setting filled with widely diverse people who are members! The dining hall (a unique blend of cafeteria and fine restaurant) seats 300 and there are 178 of us, so it's pretty full.

We do gongyo in the Friendship Auditorium, which seats 1,000. The raised altar area is framed by rows of flags from all the SGI countries. Someone from the FNCC staff speaks to us about the grounds and some of the rules. We learn that this is the largest conference ever held here; that we are to relax and be happy; that we shouldn't feel compelled to go to every meeting. Can this really be the SGI?

Before we turn in there is another outdoor reception with more food: fruit, buffalo wings and bonbons. Wonder if I'm going to stick to my diet here, as I munch a chicken wing.

March 21

Breakfast, gongyo and a group picture. I ride a bike on the trails and sit for a few minutes watching the ducks in the lake, drinking in the peacefulness of the silence. Rows of trees with placards honoring people living and deceased. Was told that it took two years to develop this land. They had to get rid of plants that were not indigenous to the Everglades and add others like live oaks, sable palms, silver buttonwoods and something called bottle brush, which sprout tiny red flowers. They planted some 3,000 trees!

Brief rain and then the sun returns in full force. Someone leads us in group exercises.

First meeting takes place in the Miami Community Center. We talk about our mission and responsibility as members of public relations, publications and study to define the SGI-USA for other members and the public. "We are the ones who have to help set the course for what it means to practice Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism in America with a view toward the entire world," Vice General Director Guy McCloskey says.

Mr. Zaitzu emphasizes that the 21st century is the century of peace, and that during these next four years the growth of each individual is extremely important to the future development of kosen-rufu in America. We must ask ourselves how to expand the capacity of our hearts. We should pray without rushing and have patience. Desire to get to know SGI President Ikeda's spirit and come closer to his heart. "It is vital not to be defeated by

your own weakness.... Study for the sake of practice.”

I admit, I had been basking in the vacation atmosphere of this place and forgetting for a minute that this is foremost a faith activity — until the above guidance. It’s right on time.

Divide into our respective groups. We first hear from two journalists about being better Buddhist writers. We also find out who “Betty Bodhisattva” is. Am pumped when I flip through our publications booklet to see that one of my articles has been included along with other *World Tribune* articles. All the writers’ names are blacked out. Ego tripping a little, and I’m wishing my name were revealed.

All this quickly deflates when I realize that my piece has been included to show how not to begin an article! Mortifying but a good lesson. Phew— thank goodness my name was blacked out after all.

One of the photographers shows some slides, and we immediately see the power of this medium. I am struck by the words “Photography is a visual language.” Many really talented and devoted people here. We talk about how to make more efforts to include youth — this becomes an important theme.

March 22

Some people mention having minor roommate problems like snoring and bright lights being turned on before they’re ready to emerge from under the sheets.

Today’s meetings are separate. *Living Buddhism* discussion is fruitful...concerns range from whether the magazine is elitist to whether Japanese terms should be rendered obsolete and, of course, how to involve youth. Impressed by how committed the writers are and how firmly rooted their faith is.

Lunch: shrimp tempura, vegetables, scallops, asparagus, lemon cod. I remark to someone how ecstatic I am about this food, and she tells me that she would prefer a hot dog or hamburger. I am rendered speechless. I eat by the lake. Sky is perfect, palm trees blowing like gentle fans.

Choose the field trip to South Miami Beach (the other choices are the Everglades and an antique mansion). Long bus ride encourages members to share their thoughts. Miami Beach — full of bodies — some beautiful, some less so. Feel as if I have too many clothes on.

Later that night we jam to DJ sounds and karaoke. Special treats are dueling “Tina Turner” performances of “What’s Love Got To Do With It?” and vigorous renditions of the Young Rascals’ “Good Lovin’” and Elton John’s “Saturday Night.” When the party ends no one wants to go to bed. There are midnight sightings of pool parties, jacuzzi caucuses and pseudo-pro basketball games.

March 23

Last day. Feel really conflicted. Not sure I can keep this good feeling about my faith and my life if I leave here. But if I stayed here forever, I’d probably take it for granted. A Florida member, in fact, said that our presence and excitement helped him have more appreciation because he comes here all the time.

One last publications roundtable, which overflows with feeling and emotion. Many deeply felt comments made about youth — really trying to incorporate their sentiments and energy. Also talk about the need to have a first-rate magazine, one that can be sold on newsstands. I leave there feeling certain of the importance of my role writing and working for these publications. Also feel determined to exert myself in this endeavor.

Open mike in Friendship Auditorium: Most people’s comments are stuffed with exuberation and appreciation. Particularly poignant, however, is a member who lived in many of the most troubled countries, including Singapore.

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She reminds us that we are practicing Buddhism for all these countries, symbolized by the flags in the room, not just our country. (When we chant three times to end the meeting, I think about her words, and they bring tears to my eyes — I have been selfish.)

Mr. Zaitso reminds us that we are returning to the real world and that we must courageously challenge our problems. No lie. We are all friends from the remote past, he says, and must eternally dedicate ourselves to our happiness and that of others.

Last meal is teriyaki chicken, stuffed tomatoes, barley mushroom soup and seafood salad. I sit by the lake, of course, happy that the fountain is on. I see the woman who impressed me at the open mike session. “Thank you for your words and your faith,” I tell her. “Never doubt this practice,” she says. I say these words under my breath over and over as I strip my bed of linen and pack to leave.

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